

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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"DUNKIRK EVACUATION" CONSIDERED FOR ENDANGERED RED WOLF

One of the most endangered mammals in North America, the red wolf, may have a better chance for survival in the wild through establishment of a cooperative Federal-State recovery team, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said today.

Appointment of the team comes on the heels of reports that the red wolf, which is imperiled by both human persecution and hybridization with the related coyote, is in an even more precarious situation than had been thought. In the early 1970's there were hopes that a last remnant population in extreme southeastern Texas could be stabilized and saved from interbreeding with the coyote. Specimens collected in 1974, however, indicate that the hybridization process now has spread even into this population. The recovery team may soon initiate new conservation measures, possibly including a "Dunkirk" type evacuation and reintroduction of red wolves in safer areas.

The red wolf, the only one of its kind in the world (all other wolves in the world are subspecies of the gray wolf), was one of six endangered species that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service selected for priority treatment when it appointed separate recovery teams for each animal recently. The five other endangered animals are: Delmarva fox squirrel, Indiana bat, Kirtland's warbler, dusky seaside sparrow, and the Mississippi sandhill crane. There are 109 animals currently listed as endangered in the United States. The six teams recently named are the first of a total of 50 recovery teams that the Fish and Wildlife Service will establish and set to work by July 1, 1975.

Heading up the red wolf recovery team is Russell Clapper of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other team members are Don Frels, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Joe L. Herring, Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission.

The team's primary objective is to guide actions to rescue the red wolf from extinction. It will refine a detailed plan which has already been put into effect and denote further specific actions needed.

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The red wolf (Canis rufus) is a close relative of the gray wolf (Canis lupus) and the domestic dog (Canis familiaris). Before the coming of European man, the red wolf was found throughout the southeastern quarter of North America, from central Texas to the Atlantic, and from the Gulf Coast north to the Ohio Valley and Pennsylvania. As was the case with other large predatory animals, the red wolf was intensively hunted, trapped, and poisoned by farmers and ranchers, because of its threat to domestic livestock. In the early 20th century, after the species had been largely eliminated east of the Mississippi River, Federal and State governments joined in the extermination effort. By the early 1970's, when it finally was legally protected, the red wolf was thought to survive only in a narrow strip of coastal marsh and prairie in extreme southeastern Texas and southwestern Louisiana.

Despite human persecution, the red wolf might have been able to survive in a few remote areas had it not been for the critical hybridization problem. Prior to the impact of modern man, the range of the red wolf was largely separate from that of its western relative, the coyote (Canis latrans). When settlers cleared forests and killed off red wolves, they inadvertently opened the way for the coyote to extend its range eastward. As the small, adaptable coyote moved in, some interbreeding occurred between it and surviving red wolves. These initial crosses set in motion a massive process of hybridization which eventually spread throughout much of the former range of the red wolf.

The presence of coyotes and hybrids led many persons to think that the red wolf still survived. Examination of many old and new specimens, however, has enabled biologists to trace the decline of the true red wolf across the continent. Before 1920, hybridization was largely restricted to central Texas. In the 1930's and 1940's the same phenomenon engulfed Arkansas, eastern Oklahoma, and southern Missouri. By the 1960's, much of eastern Texas and Louisiana also had been taken over by coyotes and hybrids, and it appeared that the red wolf survived only to the south and east of Houston in Texas, and in parts of southern Louisiana. By 1970, the only known pure red wolf population was found in Jefferson and eastern Chambers Counties, Texas, but now this population is in immediate jeopardy.

Hard-pressed Federal agents in southeast Texas have for several years been attempting to slow the tide of interbreeding by trapping coyotes and hybrids on and near red wolf range. These men also have been live-capturing stock-killing red wolves in order to moderate ill feelings by local stockmen, as well as to establish a captive breeding pool. The new recovery team may continue these and other conservation operations, and also will try to develop new methods. Some authorities have suggested a large-scale live-capture and reintroduction effort in which some of the last pure red wolves would be removed from southeast Texas and released on certain offshore islands or in other suitable areas far from the range of the coyote.

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